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Historical Consciousness and the Notion of the Authentic Self in the Qur'ān: Towards an Islamic Critical Theory

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Consciousness is of someone and of something, which is to say that to talk about consciousness is to imply an agent who is conscious and an object that the agent is conscious of. Hence, reflecting on the nature of historical consciousness in the Qur'ān one has to discuss the Qur'ānic view of human being on the one hand, and of history on the other, to arrive at what is unique about this consciousness. Investigating the Qur'ānic view of human being necessarily leads to the discussion of the notion of the authentic self in the Qur'ān. This investigation will hopefully show that the notion of the authentic self in the Qur'ān has significant critical implication.

Since Allah is addressing human being in the Qur'ān, references to human being abound in the body of the text. Yet human being is not treated as a monolithic structure in the Qur'ān but described in a variety of ways, each highlighting a particular aspect of human being. All the various descriptions ultimately boil down to just two: a negative description and a positive one. While negative descriptions are pithy in dealing with human being's dispositions and proclivities to act in certain ways when left to his/her own devices, the positive aspects of human being are hinted at, such as in the verse: "We made you from the best of mould" (95: 4). And it could not be otherwise because what human being *is* can be relatively easily determined, but what he/she *can be* is an open project the outcome of which depends on human will and action that is either guided by the truth as revealed in the Qur'ān, or is not. What human being *can be* may thus be best thought of as an historical project in the realization of which human being has the freedom to be either guided by Allah or not be so guided.

Whenever human being in general is being referred to, the Qur'ān uses the generic term *Insān*. *Insān*, usually translated as human being, is by and large a neutral term, although on occasion it carries a hint of Allah's displeasure at human being's recalcitrance in spite of repeated warnings as to what await those who disregard His signs. *Insān*, thus, denotes what human being is by and in itself viz., when left to his/her own disposition. The term '*Abd*' or '*Abd Allāh*,

on the other hand, is used in the Qur'ān to describe what human being can be. The usual translation of '*Abd Allāh*' is the servant of Allah.

Man's Authentic and Objective Self

There is yet, at another level, a further distinction between *Insān* and '*Abd Allāh*' that is implied by the first. At the level of individualized human being '*Abd Allāh*' represents human being's '**authentic self**', while *Insān* is his/her '**objective self**'. Now, someone could object that the opposite of authentic self is not objective but inauthentic self. That would indeed be true if the two selves were to be conceptualized not only as distinct but also as opposed to each other: one negative and the other positive; one bad and the other good. But the point is precisely that although the two are different they are not to be understood as opposite of each other. For while it is true that the notion of the '**authentic self**' has a positive value attached to it but that does not necessarily mean that a negative value should be assigned to the '**objective self**'. To do so would mean that since the '**objective self**' is what human being is by him/herself, human being is born with a stigma attached to it, be it of the original sin (such as in Christianity), or of sins inherited from previous life (such as in Hinduism/Buddhism).

It is common knowledge that the Islamic view regarding the state in which human being enters this world is just the opposite of this. Each newborn child inherits a level spiritual playing field; each newborn child is spiritually innocent. Thus the '**objective self**' does not describe human being's fallen state but rather his/her state as yet beyond good and evil.

The '**objective self**', far from being a fallen creature, is endowed with will and given the freedom to use it. In other words, it is that self which has been granted the freedom to choose to seek his/her authentic self or not, to become authentic or not. "We showed him the way: Whether he be grateful/ or ungrateful (rests on his will)" (Qur'ān, 76: 3).¹ In short, human being has to choose either to attain his/her true self by willing to become '*Abd Allāh*' or to realize his/her identity independent of Allah i.e., in defiance of Him. In either case this is a primary decision, made consciously or unconsciously, that shapes all the subsequent decisions one makes regarding how he/she will live in this world. In choosing to become, '*Abd*' he/she in fact chooses to enter a relationship with Allah.

This relationship, far from defining his/her identity in some peripheral or superficial way, constitutes his/her being and self in the fundamental way. In choosing to become '*Abd*', a human being becomes a Muslim. Hence it is a misconstrual of who Muslim really is if understood and conceptualized as mere human or *Insān*. Not only is there a spiritual distinction between the two concepts; there is, furthermore, a fundamental philosophical difference between

¹ All translations are from Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation of the Qur'ān.

'*Abd* and '*Insān* that supports the spiritual distinction, one which is often overlooked though.

Human being is a unitary concept that does not require yet another concept to make clear what it means. In other words, what human being is can be explained and defined entirely with reference to itself. Human being has been defined on occasions as a rational being; on others as a social being or as a maker of tools. But howsoever human being is defined, it is always defined with reference to itself. In short, the concept human being is viewed as *sui generis*. The notion of '*Abd Allāh*', on the other hand, is a relational concept. It makes no sense to speak of '*Abd Allāh*' outside or independent of the concept of Allah. And herein lies the cardinal difference between the Islamic and the secular view of human being.

From the Islamic perspective it makes little or no sense to speak of human being (*Insān*) as a social and historical agent and as a doer of deeds and achiever of great accomplishments for human being is the name of that agent who is still beyond good and evil and thus yet outside history. Human being enters history in either of two conditions: either he/she accepts Allah or rejects Him. In either case, human being-in-history is to be understood in relation to Allah and not independent of Him. On the other hand, the defining characteristic of secular discourse on human being is just this: human being is to be explained and understood in terms of itself. In the more sociologically oriented views which define self-identity in terms of social relationships, the underlying assumption is still of human being as social and hence *sui generis*. What conclusions we arrive at about human being depend a great deal on what assumptions we start off with regard to human nature.

The relationship that '*Abd*' has to Allah is, as said earlier, not external to his/her self-identity but rather constitutive of it. This helps explain the difference between 'me' and 'mine'. What I intrinsically and truly am is defined by my relationship to Allah. What I own, possess or acquire cannot therefore be constitutive of me. My relationship to Allah to be genuine has to be primary and fundamental and exclude all other relationships. My relationship to Allah cannot, therefore, be one of several relationships that define me. The goods I publicly consume and display and the talents I openly exhibit do not constitute me. They are accidents that happened to me as they are not entirely in my control. I have no say in what assortment of talents I am endowed with at birth nor where I am born. It is pure accident that one is born in a hovel and not in some rich person's house. What opportunities come my way again is a matter of accident than of design as far as my control over these events is concerned, although today this is how by and large one is defined.

In other words, the 'authentic self' cannot be the result of the relationship one has to whatever there is in and of the world including his/her faculties but only the product of the relationship one has to Allah. It is because in Islam the spiritual and not the social self that is fundamental, hence the 'authentic self' is a spiritual and not a social entity. The significance of this distinction will

become apparent in the discussion later. It was important to make the point here to show what the implications of thinking of '*Abd*' as the 'authentic self' are.

Struggle to gain Authenticity

Now, had the two selves been identical there would be no human drama, no history.² Human drama and hence history is the result of the playing out of the dialectical tension between the 'authentic' and the 'objective self'. The tension between the 'authentic' and the 'objective self' is the result of the space created by the distinction between the two across and in which human will is exercised. Thus, since angels have no freedom of will it would be meaningless to talk of 'authentic' and 'objective' selves with reference to them. The intervening space between the two selves should not, however, be thought of as flat space that can be traversed in one leap of will. It is more like space covered with steep high ridges and deep valleys and bottomless gorges. In other words, it is not a space in which horizontal movement is the only movement possible. Flat space across which horizontal motion is the only movement possible would be relatively easy to traverse.

For, it is not the case that the moment *Insān* chooses to be '*Abd*', the 'objective self' traverses the space separating the two selves and becomes the 'authentic self'. When an *Insān*, through the act of will, accepts the mantle of '*Abd*' and becomes a Muslim, he/she at that instant has only joined the battle and not won the war. An *Insān*, by becoming a Muslim, does not automatically realize his/her 'authentic self' but rather gets started on the way to realizing his/her 'authentic self'. One act of will is not all that is required to gain authenticity. The intervening space between the two selves is one of contestation, strife, struggle and *jihād*, of falling into deep gorges and struggling to get back to the top of the ridge again and by no means an easy sailing from point A to point B. In Islam there is no instant salvation. The Qur'ān clearly states: "Do men think that they will be left alone on saying, 'We believe', and that they will not be tested". (29: 2)

Spiritual-Ethical Value of Learning

Being on the way to realizing one's 'authentic self' is a learning process and learning takes time. This learning is not quite like learning a skill or mastering a subject but rather learning from life-experiences by reflecting on them. What fundamentally differentiates the three types of learning, however, is not so much the mode by which the learnt is acquired but rather by what is at stake in each. What is at stake in learning a skill is gaining proficiency in doing a job

² For further elaboration on the notion of human drama see my "Notion of History in the Qur'ān and Human Destiny" in *Islamic Studies*, vol. 37. no. 2 (Summer, 1998).

safely and efficiently and be rewarded socially and/or financially for having done so. The stake in mastering a subject is gaining a greater understanding of an object domain in order perhaps to manipulate that domain better for greater profit and/or improving the human lot on earth. For one on the road to the 'authentic self' the stake is of an entirely different sort. One's career may be on line in trying to acquire a skill or in mastering an academic subject but hardly ever is one's life at stake in those endeavours.

On the road to the 'authentic self' the traveller's **life** is precisely what is at stake. This is what makes it different from all other learning experiences. It should not, however, be understood that learning of a skill or mastering a subject has no bearing or relationship to the search for the 'authentic self'. The point is that while *'Abd* learns everything with the view to its contribution to realizing the 'authentic self', others learn for reasons none of which has anything to do with the search for the 'authentic self' as explained here. In this context, therefore, the distinction between religious and secular knowledge is almost meaningless. It is not so much the content but the purpose for which knowledge is acquired that makes the difference. That is why Islam invests acquisition of knowledge, all knowledge, be it religious or secular, with spiritual and ethical value. It is in this context that learning as such is to be viewed in Islam.

It is absolutely imperative that the claim that *'Abd*'s life is at stake in the learning process should be made clear. The issue is what does the statement that *'Abd*'s life is at stake mean? It is obvious that it refers to the quality of life of *'Abd*. Now, the notion of the 'quality of life' in the context of Islam invokes in the minds of most Muslims and non-Muslims alike fairly regularly the images of hell and heaven. In other words, 'quality of life' refers to life in the hereafter and not so much to the life here and now. True, the Qur'ān is replete with graphic descriptions of both hell and heaven and admonishes *Insān* with the promise of heaven and the threat of hell and reminds him/her that life here is temporary while what awaits after death is permanent. But to argue that Islam is other-worldly on the basis of such descriptions and reminders is a gross distortion of the Islamic view of life. This is tantamount to saying that the Qur'ān teaches Muslims to focus on life hereafter at the cost of life here. This reading of the teachings of the Qur'ān dichotomizes human life into life here and life hereafter, separating one life from the other. From the Islamic perspective, this dichotomy makes no sense. For neither life independent of the other would have any credibility and legitimacy to say nothing of making sense.

Human life, according to the Qur'ān, is comprised of several acts of a single play of which no act can stand on its own. What the last act in a play does is to foreground the previous acts in order to make them stand out in sharp relief so that the final resolution or denouement of the story would make sense to the viewer. What is made to stand out in relief and what the resolution is depends on the story that the play is trying to tell. Since the Qur'ān is telling

a spiritual and an ethical story, human spiritual and ethical life is made to stand out in relief against the background of winning an entry to heaven or being banished to hell which are primarily and fundamentally spiritual and ethical concepts.

In other words, life is viewed as having a narrative structure of which the beginning is here and denouement some place else. What links the two realms is, after all, human life as a narrative structure. The foregrounding of spiritual and ethical life of *Insān* here and now is not, however, achieved at the cost of negating the fullness of life. A spirituality that emasculates life is an empty shell; it is like killing the patient in order to cure him/her. The spiritual and ethical life in Islam are for the sake of reaching and enjoying the fullness of life; it is thus life-affirming and not life-negating.

The Qur'an projects a model of life in which intensity of life is reached through intensity of spiritual form. Intensity of form is realized through discipline. A lump of clay thus has no form nor intensity. The hands of the potter on the potter's wheel discipline the lump of clay by giving it form and hence intensity. No one considers the decision of an athlete to undergo a rigorous regime of discipline as negation of life because everyone recognizes that training is necessary for achieving excellence in any area of human endeavour. And what is excellence if not reaching the fullness of life in one specific area of life where life is most intensely lived, experienced and enjoyed. If we shift our gaze from one particular area of life to life as a whole and consider that as a field in which human being can endeavour to reach excellence, we begin to recognize the importance of spiritual discipline. For life can be grasped as a totality only when viewed as a spiritual project; short of that life breaks up into its constituent parts like beads of a rosary when the thread is broken.

Thus spiritual intensity is an attribute of life in general which the spiritual discipline helps to achieve. Life without form lacks intensity and spiritual discipline gives form to life. Spiritual discipline helps one to lead a life that is intensely lived, experienced and enjoyed. Or, to realize excellence in life in general is to give life a spiritual form through discipline. Hence spirituality cannot be life-negating but most definitely life-affirming, and if it is life-affirming, then it must be squarely situated in-the-world. The life of a Muslim is neither that of an ascetic nor of a hermit; Islam does not reject human sensuous life but affirms it by giving it form and specific content, that is to say, by disciplining it. For after all it is through our senses that we experience and live our lives, but that does not mean that we surrender life to our senses and lead a promiscuous life. Just as a lump of clay does not have the ability to discipline itself and give itself a form so do human senses lack the ability to discipline themselves. It is through the disciplining of the senses that our sensuous life is given a form. Is not the life of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) an example of a life lived to the full?

Thus, what is at stake for an *'Abd* as he/she struggles across the space between the 'objective' and the 'authentic self' is life. And life means not life here as opposed to there, or there as opposed to life here, but life in its totality, which is one continuous narrative stretching from here to there, lived to the full. In other words, it is the intensity of life that is at stake for *'Abd*. However, this is not the intensity that is achieved either by pumping drugs into one's body or brought on by adrenal rush by putting oneself in the harm's way. These indulgences express a life that has rejected all discipline and abandoned all form; in short, an expression of a dissipated life. And the intensity gained is at best sporadic, temporary and finally destructive and thus life-negating. What is at stake for an *'Abd* is an intensity that is achieved as a result of undergoing the discipline of learning and learning to discipline.

Learning is a process; in other words; learning is an historical enterprise. Thus there is neither instant learning nor instant salvation. That is why it was stated very early in the discussion that what human can be is an historical project and since what human being or *Insān* can be is *'Abd*, the realization of *'Abdhood* is an historical project. It should be clear that *'Abdhood* is not an external adornment that is stitched on the 'objective self' but rather the expression of the 'objective self's' innermost nature. It is the realization of 'objective self's' inner possibility to become a certain type of being that makes him/her authentic. Neither history nor *'Abdhood*, however, is external to human being. It is because the 'objective self' is inherently historical that it is at all possible for it to seek authenticity.

One is not born in the state of authenticity but becomes authentic. And becoming is a process that unfolds in time. It would be truer to say, however, that time is constitutive of that which unfolds in time. In other words, human being is that type of being of whom time is a constitutive part, i.e. it is historical. And it could not be otherwise if human being is to realize his/her God-given gift of freedom. However, the journey undertaken by *Insān* to realize his/her *'Abdhood* takes place in actual time and not in some transcendental realm beyond time and space.

Otherness of History

History, in other words, is not a realm that offers no resistance to one traversing it but rather a space marked, defined and shaped by accidents and contingencies that confront human being as the otherness of history. The concept of 'the otherness of history' is proposed in opposition to the Hegelian view that history has an immanent plan that unfolds in time. According to this view, humans should try to understand this plan and work in alignment with it for this plan ultimately culminates in absolute reality being made present when concept and object finally become identical.

This view leads to history becoming both the judge and the jury and investing the historically contingent with value. Whatever values history makes available, as long as they are in line with the plan immanent of history, they

are to be considered as morally binding. There is no point outside of history to which history is to be made accountable. The 'otherness of history' suggests that history has no inherent plan that unfolds in time but that history is the result of unintended consequence of human actions that always offer resistance to intended human actions. And the challenge and the test lie exactly in facing up to the otherness of history. Hence human freedom is a limited freedom. History can thus be viewed as an expression of freedom of a finite being.

To put it a little differently, of all the limited beings in Allah's universe historicity or historical nature is the unique characteristic of only one being, namely, human. History is the realm given to human being to work out his/her freedom in. Angels, for example, do not exist on the plane of history; they are for eternity frozen in time in the act of worshipping Allah. Time dimension, which is the dimension of freedom, and its attended hazards and responsibilities is denied to all except human being. It is for naught that the Qur'ān declares, "We did offer the trust to the Heavens and the Earth and the mountains, but they refused to undertake it being afraid thereof. But man undertook it" (33: 72). History, however, is a possibility only because human being is historical to begin with. What does it mean to say though that human being is a being who is historical in nature? This is a question that gets to the very heart of the issue under discussion and we now turn to answer this question.

Man's Relationship to Time

The statements like human being is historical because he/she is born and then dies or that he/she is subject to time and thus to change, other than stating the obvious do not tell us much about the issue at hand. It would be more profitable to follow the line of inquiry initiated by thinkers such as Hüsserl, Dilthey, Heidegger, and more recently, MacIntyre. According to them, to be human is to have a particular relationship to time. Human being is no doubt to be located in time and to be subject, like everything else, to temporal sequence. Yet:

It is not merely to undergo or endure or suffer this sequence as it comes, one thing at a time.... Nor is the individual merely a temporally persisting, underlying substance which supports the changing effects of time as subject to its predicates or properties, like a thing. Nor yet does it merely accumulate "traces" of what goes by, as does a path which bears the footprints of those who have passed. Each of these metaphors for human temporality has been tried, and each contains some truth, but all are inadequate.³

³Carr David, *Time, Narrative and History* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1986),

What is being suggested is that we do not experience a sequence of time, but only stretches of time. For example, when listening to melody or a tune, we are not aware of all the individual notes that constitute the tune as they are produced in a sequential order, but rather we are aware of, and listen to, a tune. It is possible for us to listen to a tune because our consciousness has a temporal stretch. Thus, metaphors that imply that self traverses the open plane of time incurring no change in itself, preserving its wholeness, completeness, and continuity with itself are inadequate because none captures the sense of human temporality. Human temporality is unique; it consists not of sequential time but of temporal stretch.

It is not that self exists in the present and then has the capacity to envisage the future and remember the past; rather, human reality is a kind of temporal reach or stretch. Self, in other words, is not an entity that exists or is present in any one instance of time, but rather is thrown across time in such a manner that past, present and future are internally related, each making sense only by virtue and terms of such a relationship. According to Dilthey: "This life-connection is not a sum or a collection of moments succeeding one other, but a unity constituted through relations that connect all parts".⁴

We can now interpret the notion of the 'temporal stretch' a little differently. Consciousness, it was said earlier, has 'temporal stretch' which makes it possible for us to listen to a tune or melody instead of individual notes. The meaningfulness of what we are listening to, in other words, is due to the 'temporal stretch' of which our consciousness is capable. The capacity of consciousness to stretch temporally is its ability to relate the parts to the whole, and the whole to the parts, in its attempt to make both, the part and the whole, meaningful. The cyclical movement is what is called the hermeneutical circle. The hermeneutical circle, therefore, not only has the capacity to stretch across time and hold together series of notes or events, but to bring them together in a meaningful way. Thus, the listening to a tune

... involves not only series of events unfolding in time, according to a structure but also a perspective-retrospective grasp which holds together that unfolding and constitutes its structure. For us the meaning of the whole is discernible, if at all, only from the perspective of one of its parts; and yet understandable, its parts is if at all, only as belonging to the whole.⁵

Self Unfolds in Time

Self, therefore, is a meaningful temporal structure that unfolds in time, which is to suggest that self is a narrative. In other words, the moments and events in the life of a self are meaningful because they are part of a narrative — they

⁴As quoted in Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford University Press: Palo Alto California, 1987), 29.

⁵Carr. *Time, Narrative and History*, 96.

make sense in the narrative — and the narrative is meaningful because of the events that constitute it. The structuring of the narrative, however, is not a one shot affair. Self as a narrative is a story that grows, and develops through simple accumulation or accretion of events. It is a narrative in which not only the understanding of the past shapes the understanding of the present events, and signals future happenings, but one in which the reverse is also equally true. The past is never fixed in meaning, dead and done away with, but alive and vital and constantly being revised and reinterpreted in the light of new understanding, of which the past understanding is the necessary condition. Self, in other words, is a story that is constantly being rewritten. The writing and rewriting of the narrative, which is self, is hermeneutical and cyclical in nature.

Self as a Narrative

We can now interpret our previous discussion of the 'objective self' and the 'authentic self' in terms of self as a narrative. The 'objective self' is a self whose narrative is yet to be written in any positive way; it refers to the state of affairs that exists prior to self having taken a definite stand, one way or the other, with respect to his/her narrative. In that sense it is a state of relative innocence because as yet no decision has been taken regarding in which direction the story of self will unfold. Now, one could argue that not taking a stand with respect to one's narrative is also an option. Indeed it is, but this would be tantamount to forfeiting the responsibility one has to one's life. It is to live from one day to the next without any care or concern for how one's life shapes up. To live from day to day is not to have any plans for tomorrow, and without thought for tomorrow the notion of discipline is meaningless. Not to take a stand with respect to one's narrative, in other words, is to choose to have a life from which discipline would be singularly missing. Life without discipline is life devoid of definite form and shape and thus lacking in intensity. It is because '*Abd*' takes the responsibility of his/her life seriously that the 'authentic self' becomes an issue at all. And one chooses to be an '*Abd*' and thus chooses to undertake the struggles towards the realization of the 'authentic self'.

In fact it would be truer to say that it is part of being '*Abd*' to take the form and the shape of one's life seriously. In other words, how his/her narrative unfolds in time is of great concern to '*Abd*'.

Human freedom ultimately boils down to the irrevocable act of having to choose: to choose either to accept the responsibility of one's life, i.e., one's narrative or not. A human being has no choice over where he/she is placed in the world; one is literally thrown into this world. One is nevertheless free within the limited historical horizon in which one is born either to be or not

be '*Abd.* It does not matter if I am rich or poor, brilliant or mediocre, talented or not. What alone matters is that I choose and that I choose to be '*Abd.*'⁶

For, as was said earlier, whatever I have or possess in this world is indeed mine but my possessions do not constitute me. All worldly belongings, even possession such as talent, are but accidental accoutrements that are given to test us with. To think that a talent that I might have is truly mine in the sense that it constitutes me is to exhibit conceit and display vanity. The thing that constitutes me and the only thing that should constitute me is my relationship to Allah and to no other being or object.

We, after all, as social beings, come to know ourselves and get recognized by others by the sort of things we relate to. And thus the people for whom the social is the ultimate and the only realm of human existence, scrupulously and painstakingly cultivate relationships with objects and human beings of the "proper sort". For such people the decision who to dine and socialize with and what to consume is a very serious matter. For them their whole life, as they know it, depends on the right decision regarding such relationships. It is no wonder that we now have an entire area of expertise called Public Relations devoted to these types of decisions.

If, however, we once recognize on the evidence of the Qur'ān, that the social is not the only realm of human existence but beyond and other than the social there is a realm where happenings like Allah shaping *Insān* from the best of mould and giving it the faculty of language and endowing it with creative powers occur, we will be forced to acknowledge that realm to be primary and the social as secondary. The other realm is primary not only by virtue of being first but also for being foundational. If we call the foundational spiritual then the spiritual realm ought to give shape to the social, and the relations in the first should be foundational for the second. And life, as we ought to know, stretches from life here to life hereafter, does not derive its meaning and significance entirely from the social.

Thus the responsibility of deciding spiritual relations is far more onerous than the decisions regarding social relations can ever be. The spiritual relations have infinitely greater sweep than social relations have. It is for this reason that human freedom is truly exercised and taxed in the spiritual realm. And this is the awesome responsibility which none of Allah's other creatures are capable of taking on except *Insān*. Herein lies the uniqueness of human being. But while this responsibility can help *Insān* to rise to the heights it is capable of rising to, it can also be the cause of its fall to the level lower than lowest beast.

⁶It is, however, the society's responsibility to see that everyone's basic human needs are met at a historically determined level. Although it is true that one does not live by bread alone, but without the bread one does not live at all. Thus the availability of bread is necessary but not sufficient. Poverty is not only a social but also a spiritual disease. 'Allah commands justice' (16: 90). And Allah's justice is all-inclusive. For without social justice spiritual justice is meaningless, and without spiritual justice social justice would have no real content.

If you accept the responsibility you have a chance of realizing your potential, but if you don't, you surely lose. And indeed for those intrepid souls who choose to realize their 'authentic self' there is the guarantee of free tuition and guidance from Allah. That is why the Qur'ān calls those who forfeit this responsibility ignorant and unjust, for they will never know what they were capable of and how, by failing to realize their full potential, they have done themselves a great injustice.

The Responsibility of Choice

The responsibility of the choice of either being *'Abd* or denying Allah is nothing but the responsibility of taking the narrative that we are seriously. And this responsibility is nothing but the responsibility that calls one to oneself. The call to oneself neither means being self-conscious nor in an egotistical and pedantic way being self-absorbed, but rather being acutely aware of the responsibility of understanding who and what one is. The Qur'ān is a book of guidance, guiding us back to ourselves by helping us to recognize our 'authentic self' and, guiding us on the path of self-realization of our 'authentic self'. Hence, a continuous and constant refrain throughout the pages of the Qur'ān is of Allah admonishing us to take charge of our lives and immediately follow that, showing how we can best discharge this duty. In Islam the call to oneself, therefore, is only possible if we first assent to *lā ilāha illā'llāh* and recognize that our 'authentic self' is in being *'Abd Allāh*. Our self-awareness, in other words, is not immediate but rather mediated by our awareness of Allah. Just as a child abandoned by its parents would not know what and who it is, similarly *Insān* without Allah's guidance would not know what and who it is.

A corollary of this would be that an awareness of self that is not mediated by the acceptance of the existence of Allah would be, from an Islamic point of view, an awareness of inauthentic self. The belief that self is purely social would be an example of such an inauthentic self. Thus a Muslim's identity is not defined by his/her profession nor by his/her social status but solely by his/her submission to Allah. Islam, for that reason, is rigorously and uncompromisingly egalitarian. It is not that the Qur'ān preaches a form of primitive communism that Marx talked about, but what marks one's standing with Allah is not what one owns or possesses but the stage one has reached in realizing one's 'authentic self'. What is mine, as said earlier, is purely accidental and not essential to my being *'Abd Allāh*.

It is common knowledge that learning is a process and process is that which unfolds in time. It not only takes time to master something but time also allows us to learn from our previous mistakes. Learning is, in part, to learn not to make the mistakes made earlier. Learning, hence, is an historical project. But learning as an historical project is possible only because human being is an historical project to begin with. Thus when brought to one's self we see our self as an historical project, this project, as stated earlier, is to be understood as a learning process. The Qur'ān's constant reminder to human being that

'Unless he repents, believes and works righteous deeds, for Allah will change the evil of such persons into good, and Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful', (20: 70) underscores learning as a process and self as historical. In other words, had 'self' not been historical there would be neither learning nor forgiveness possible. In such a world there would instead be instant damnation or salvation and, as a consequence, little or no room for Allah's mercy.

Someone may object that if authenticity of self lies in the realization of our relationship to Allah then it can hardly be historical. On this view, our relationship to Allah is other worldly and not of the stuff of this world and hence ahistorical. Those who hold this view will further argue that the Qur'ān consistently emphasizes the temporary and transient nature of this world in comparison to the world hereafter and thus what is true and real, they say, is ahistorical. No one who is at all familiar with the Qur'ān will deny that the Qur'ān describes this world as transient. It will, however, be wrong to conclude from this that this world is, therefore, unimportant. The Qur'ān in describing the world as temporary is giving an empirically accurate picture of the world and, telling us to see the world as it really is: subject to time and hence changing and temporary.

The Qur'ānic description of the world should not, however, be read simply as a lesson in natural science, but more importantly as a lesson in ontology. The ontological lesson is that what we perceive with our senses though important and real in the sense of being an expression of Allah's mercy but is not the sum total of all there is. The Qur'ānic descriptions thus function as a necessary corrective to our ordinary every day experience of the world.

Liberation from the Confines of This World

The Qur'ān liberates us from the confines of this world not by saying that this world does not matter but by broadening our gaze to include the world beyond. This world is not just a smoke and mirror affair but real; our senses are not deceived.⁷ Does not the Qur'ān draw our attention to things that are available to our senses in order for us to comprehend the glory of Allah? The point is that we should not limit ourselves to the testimony of our senses alone. This world is to be made sense of not in terms of itself but rather with reference to the world that lies beyond our sense perception and our unaided mind to comprehend. Human error lies in thinking that this world, the world we experience with our senses, has no point of reference to anything outside of itself. But nowhere does the Qur'ān deny the importance of this world. For

⁷Descartes, in *Meditations*, meditating on the possibility of finding a way to ground knowledge on indubitable foundations, worried that perhaps he is being deceived by God and the world of sense perception is not real. Since for him there was no way to know for sure if he was being deceived or not, he ultimately assumed that he was not. We, however, do not have to just assume; we know, on the testimony of the Qur'ān, in what way the world is real to us and for us.

after all the Qur'ān says: "Allah will establish in strength those who believe, with the Word that stand in this world and in the Hereafter" (14: 27). Furthermore, if we are to be the inheritors of this world, "It is He Who hath made you (His) agents, inheritors of this earth" (6: 165), then this world must be important and not unreal.

The view that this world is not real and thus not important has drastic consequences for the way we relate ourselves to this world. If this world is not real and thus does not matter then the only option open to human being is to withdraw from this world to some remote and isolated corner and there, without any disturbance from this world, meditate on the world hereafter. In other words, we should not be involved in the events of this world nor should it matter to us what happens in here. If that is the attitude Muslims should adopt with regard to this world, then how are we to understand the following Qur'ānic verse: "And why should ye not fight in the cause of Allah and of those who, being weak are ill-treated (and oppressed)?" (4: 75). Furthermore, how are we to understand the *Sunnah* of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him), which consisted, in great measure, of being involved in the affairs of the world in order to change it? This world is indeed not Real in the metaphysical sense but nevertheless real for human actions in-the-world for on what we do here depends where we will go next; are we to be among the believers or one of those who are destined for hell fire?

Road To Realization of "Authentic Self"

The Prophet of Islam (peace be on him), through the concrete example of his life, made abundantly clear that the spiritual battle is won or lost on the plains of this world. Thus the statement: realization of the 'authentic self' is an historical project, means that '*Abd Allah*'s wars on the road to the 'authentic self' are to be fought in this world. Thus, although the 'authentic self' refers to one's relationship to Allah, yet this relationship has to be realized in and through this world. In Islam the nature of the relationship to Allah is such that for one seeking to strengthen this relationship, involvement in the world is necessary. In other words, '*Abd Allāh*' has to be in history in order to travel the road towards the realization of his/her 'authentic self'.

A secluded monastic life is alien to Islam. As said earlier, spiritual existence in Islam does not emasculate life but brings it to fullness. In fact, according to Islam, it is only by living a spiritual life that life can be truly affirmed. One way to understand what is being said is to view the relationship to Allah as a triangular one, with Allah at the apex and 'self' and 'others' at the two base corners of the triangle. Given the triangular nature of the relationship, when '*Abd Allāh*' travels along the path leading to Allah, he/she has to travel along the path leading to 'others' as well. '*Abd Allāh*', in other words, is not allowed the luxury to withdraw from the world in order to seek Allah. Progress along the path to Allah is through submission to His will. And "Allah commands justice" (16: 90) and requires us not only to pay *zakāt*, but also fight for the

oppressed, the weak and the ill-treated. In short, Allah demands that we be involved in the world; there is no escaping our being in history. Thus from the Qur'ānic perspective we are truly human when we are in history.

Although there is no either/or situation facing *'Abd Allāh*, there is nevertheless tension between the two paths; either to seek only Allah and be blind to the world or be involved in the world and remain ignorant of Allah. There is always the temptation to go along one path to the exclusion of the other. But to choose between the two paths is to go against the will of Allah. Thus part of *'Abd Allāh's* struggle is to constantly fight this temptation.

The discussion has so far tried to show that it is necessary for *'Abd Allāh* to be in history in order to realize *'Abdhood*. But this, in turn, has raised two secondary questions that need to be addressed to make the thesis argued for here credible. The first question is, does the notion of being in history follow from the fact that human life is historical and thus everyone is in history? And the second question has to do with how to tell *'Abd Allāh* from the rest in the way he/she is located in history. The issues are (a) to make clear what "being in history" means, and (b) to figure out in what way, if any, is *'Abd Allāh* situated in history differently. There is much in what already has been said that points in the direction in which the answer to this question lies.

Meaning of "To be in History"

The expression 'in history' is used here in a very specific sense. At a glance it appears as a statement of fact that affirms that history is a necessary attribute of existence i.e. to exist is to exist in history. Although in a general sense that is true, that is not how the term has been used here. To be 'in history' means more specifically to recognize the importance of the phenomenon of life on this earth and, having recognized to engage in life practices that help to perpetuate and preserve and improve life on earth. Hence, a mode of life that does not contribute either to the continuity of life or to its improvement, would not be an expression of being in history. On this view, therefore, monastic life would not represent being 'in history'.

Thus not all modes of human existence are modes of existing in history. In other words, the term 'in history' does not make the obvious point that we are all in history but rather points to a particular way of being in history which is of engagement in and not of withdrawal from history. And one is engaged in history by being involved in society out of concern for the well being of its members. The concern is neither exclusively for their spiritual nor their physical well-being, but for their life being as a compact whole, which is physical and spiritual simultaneously. In short, it is the concern for the conditions under which life is lived. This is why, for Muslims, the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (peace be on him) is the prime example of being in history. The Prophet Muḥammed (peace be on him) neither withdrew from society and hence history, nor preached a message which sacrificed justice here for justice

there. And for an *'Abd*, the *Sunnah* of the Prophet is a sure and certain guide to *'Abdhood*.

Now it is obviously not true that the mode of existence characterized here as being in history, is peculiar to the Islamic way of life. One of the defining characteristic of Western thought since the Enlightenment, has been continuous and consistent theorizing about being in history of human beings. This problematic is at the bottom of much of modern political and social thought and of philosophy as well. What makes this particularly a modern problematic is the emergence, in 18th century, of the social and the historical as philosophical categories. What is unique about Islam is that at its advent in 7th century, it reflected a very modern concern. While it is true that only a modern reading of the Qur'an would highlight this problematic in the Qur'an, yet it is not a reading that is reading what is not in the Qur'an. We have now, therefore, to make clear in what way, if any, is the Islamic view of this problematic different from the non-Islamic one.

For one who is an *'Abd* it is a categorical imperative to be in history without, however, being of history. To know the difference between in and of history and to embody the truth of the distinction in his/her life is what separates the Islamic view of human historicity from the non-Islamic. What needs to be done now is to spell out the meaning by the term 'of history'.

Meaning of "To be of History"

Although 'of history' is not necessarily a difficult concept to understand but it is nevertheless, not a simple one to explain and unpack. It is a concept that represents a constellation of issues that all deal with human being's situatedness in history. At the centre of this constellation of issues is the distinction between 'me' and 'mine' made at the very beginning of the discussion. *'Abd's* identity, it was said earlier, is defined by his/her submission to Allah or rather *'Abd's* relationship to Allah is constitutive of his/her identity. Everything else besides this relationship, be it possession of talents or of material goods, is external to *'Abd's* identity. In other words, my relationship to Allah is constitutive of my true and essential self i.e., my authentic self. What I own, possess or have is given to me by Allah in this world, does not survive this world, and hence cannot be an essential part of me. To the extent that I allow what I own and possess to define me to that extent I become inauthentic. To preserve my 'authentic self', therefore, it is necessary that I do not allow the distinction between 'me' and 'mine' to collapse.

Thus, while the distinction between 'me' and 'mine' is crucial for understanding the nature of the 'authentic self', the maintenance of the distance between 'me' and 'mine' is crucial for sustaining the 'authentic self' over time, which is to say, historically. The efforts directed at the maintenance of the distance between the two, therefore, are social and political in nature. In order to maintain the distinction *'Abd* has to engage in social and political activity.

It is common knowledge that for a Muslim alongside belief in *lā ilāha illā'llāh* and in the Prophet Muḥammed (peace be on him) as the last prophet is the belief in resurrection and the Day of Judgment. Even a casual reader will not fail to notice the regularity with which the Qur'ān reminds the reader of the dire consequences of not believing in the resurrection and the Day of Judgment. And the reason why the Qur'ān is so emphatic is because it requires the fact of the Day of Judgment to become part of an 'Abd's everyday consciousness and just as conspicuous and solid as the objects that surround him/her. It is this consciousness that enables a person to rise above the experiential world by reminding him/her that the narrative that is self does not end with death and that there will be a Day when the narrative will be judged not on its literary merits but on ethical grounds. In other words, the consciousness of the Day of Judgment dramatically alters the structure and nature of 'Abd's narrative in a number of ways. For one thing, 'Abd is ultimately accountable to Allah not for the meaningfulness or the lack thereof of his/her narrative, but for the ethical quality of the story line he/she followed in making sense of life. For if one viewed life as ending in this world, then meaningfulness of one's self as a narrative would be one's primary and only concern. The ethical worth of the narrative becomes a concern only when I know that someone who has the power to either save or damn me will judge my narrative on ethical grounds. Hence the narrative of 'Abd has not only to be meaningful but has also to be ethically justifiable to Allah.

Ethical Worth of Life

A cautionary remark is called for here. It is necessary not to view the meaningfulness and the ethical justifiability as separate layers of a narrative. It is not being claimed that 'Abd's narrative is meaningful and ethically justifiable also, as if justification is something added to the meaningfulness of narrative. This way of thinking makes meaning and justification two separate concerns when, in fact, they are a single activity and concern. For 'Abd makes sense of each present in light of the past, the future and the remote future i.e., the Day of Judgment. But perhaps the best way to conceptualize the Qur'ānic view of the Day of Judgment is to think of it not as the remote future but rather as the permanent backdrop to all of 'Abd's actions, thoughts and aspirations. Thus for life to be meaningful it has to be ethically justifiable. In other words, only that act will be meaningful to 'Abd that can be ethically justified to Allah. Meaning can never be ethically neutral for 'Abd.

Now someone may assert that 'Abd is no different from one whose life can be morally justified. But to lead a moral life one has only to acquiesce to follow the rule that a moral code has laid down. The rule following does not require the code to be constitutive of the being of a person for him/her to consent to follow the rule. For example, a doctor can be a proficient physician and yet may not be a moral person or may be moral in some but not in all aspects of his/her life. No moral code is constitutive of being an excellent surgeon or for

that matter an outstanding engineer or even a brilliant teacher. One can be anyone of them and yet not be a moral person. One often hears it being said that so and so is an excellent doctor but alas not a moral person.

Moral codes, in other words, are external to the being of a person and as such he/she may choose to follow them however often and whenever he/she wishes. For *'Abd qua 'Abd* the demands that Allah makes are constitutive of his/her being and the demand are to live a particular sort of life, to engage in a particular sort of actions and to think a particular sort of thoughts; in short, to be a particular sort of person. In order to achieve this *'Abd* has to follow an ethical life. And shorn of ethical life the notion of *'Abd* would make no sense. Life of *'Abd*, therefore, cannot be reduced to mere rule following. To achieve ethical life is what the struggle of *'Abd* is all about.

Determinant of Moral Attitude

It would be clear now that the ethical life of *'Abd* is possible only against the backdrop of the Day of Judgment. In order to lead an ethical life *'Abd's* narrative has to go beyond life here and now and anchor itself in life after death. Thus, while *'Abd* has to make sense of life here and now, but he/she makes sense of it with reference to life beyond death; the Day of Judgment is an essential consideration in any sense he/she makes of events on earth. In other words, *'Abd's* life can never be totally identified with life here and now.

To put it a little differently, while *'Abd* is in history, yet because his/her life is not encapsulated by history he/she is not of history. To be of history is to identify with the experiences in history to the extent of defining and constituting your 'authentic self'. For, to be of history is to lose sight of the backdrop which is the Day of Judgment and to be preoccupied with what is 'mine', viz., my desires, wishes, achievements and possessions and hence to allow the distinction between 'me' and 'mine' to collapse. Thus *'Abd* is in but not of history. The awareness of being in but not of history drives the wedge between 'me' and 'mine'. That which is 'mine' is the stuff of history and hence cannot be constitutive of my 'authentic self'.

By being in history and not of history furnishes *'Abd* with the unique 'inside-outside' perspective on history and, since society is historical, on society as well. By being simultaneously both inside and outside history allows *'Abd* to have a detached stance towards society. A certain degree of detachment is necessary to look at society critically. And since it is society that keeps throwing roadblocks along *'Abd's* path in his/her search for the 'authentic self', to view society critically is an essential part of being *'Abd*.

Involvement in Society to Realize "Authentic Self"

To be a member of a society is to have your self defined and identity determined by the institutions of that society. Society always exerts enormous pressure on its members to be both in society and of society. In fact, most

often the condition for being in society is to be of society. Society does not tolerate a person to be in society if he/she is not also of society. Such members as resist being of society are defined by society as deviant and are marginalized. The deviant status may be criminal and the person marginalized through incarceration; or a person may be deemed deviant if he/she refuses to compete for any of the 'goodies' that society offers and marginalized by being defined as a failure.

'Abd, by virtue of being in history, is involved in society but remains nevertheless detached because he/she is not of society. To be detached does not mean to be withdrawn from society but rather not allow social institution to define his/her self. To be detached also means to keep society at bay and not participate in social games the outcome of which determine social success and failure and, if participation is necessary not to let success or failure be constitutive of the 'self'. *'Abd*, as a consequence, is an entity that does not show up on the map of any social institution. My relationship to Allah and my authentic self have neither institutional recognition nor support. An *'Abd qua 'Abd* does not occupy institutional space; he/she is not necessarily a doctor or a lawyer or even a teacher. An *'Abd* represents a style of life that embodies certain virtues and not a way of making a living.

'Abd is involved in society in order to realize his/her 'authentic self', which is fundamentally an ethical and not a social enterprise. *'Abd* does not, therefore, engage in social critique purely and primarily for the sake of realizing some social good, which is not to say, however, that no social good results from the critique. Since *'Abd's* critique is an ethical enterprise its goal and criterion can not be determined or in any way compromised by social and historical contingencies, which is to say historical fads and fashions. It is because *'Abd* is not of society that his/her critique is free from historical contingencies and social fads and fashions. It would not help *'Abd* to be 'politically correct'. What should be done in a given situation is determined not by what political and social contingencies demand, but what is ethically correct. And what is ethically correct is understood in terms of *'Abd's* relationship to Allah. Social arrangements that either help the relationship or do not in any way hinder it would be ethically acceptable.

The position from which the critique is made is thus situated neither wholly inside nor wholly outside society. For although *'Abd's* relationship to Allah transcends society, yet this relationship has to be realized in society. And to be purposefully and effectively involved in society requires a good grasp of the workings of society.

Personalization of truth a perpetual process

Furthermore, since the search for the 'authentic self' is an historical project, *'Abd's* involvement in society does not mean either freezing a particular social arrangement in time or trying to capture some past social arrangement and

living in it in perpetuity. 'Abd has to live through a variety of social arrangements or social arrangements as they change overtime.

'Abd's critical activity, therefore, has to be understood as a dialectical movement from outside society to inside and again from inside society to outside. This is because the abstract universal ethical principle has to be realized in the concrete specifics of 'Abd's life in society. The abstract universal principle has to be lived in society and not just grasped intellectually. Merely understanding the principle intellectually would not bring about a concrete change in 'Abd's life and in society. This requires continuous to and fro movement between the universal and the concrete over time.

'Abd, in other words, has to personalize the truth that he/she wants to live by. The need to personalize truth, however, is not a one-act affair. Since the search for the 'authentic self' is an historical project, truth has to be personalized again and again in ever changing historical situations. Concretization or personalization of truth is nothing but an expression of the triangular relationship which 'Abd's life represents. Any movement along one plane in the triangular relationship has to be accompanied by a similar movement along the other plane.

Critical Tool for Realization of "Authentic Self"

At this juncture it is necessary to identify and elaborate the critical tool that 'Abd uses to tear down the obstacles on the path to the realization of the 'authentic self'. And that tool is *lā ilāha illā'llāh*. It is customary for Muslims to regard *lā ilāha illā'llāh* merely as an article of faith, as something to believe in, pure and simple. Rarely do they reflect on the critical potential of this phrase that begins with a negation. To view it merely as an expression of belief in the one God is to reduce it to an inert matter of fact and fail to realize what else it could mean. The meaning of the phrase *lā ilāha illā'llāh* needs to be explored beyond the taken for granted meaning of belief in the one God. It is beyond the usual meaning that the hidden potentials of the phrase *lā ilāha illā'llāh* lie. To go beyond the generally understood meaning does not mean the rejection of the generally understood meaning, but rather using that as the base to show what else it could mean.

Even a casual reflection on the phrase *lā ilāha illā'llāh* will not fail to draw attention to the fact that it begins with a negation. In most religions a principle as central to their structure as *lā ilāha illā'llāh* is to Islam, is given in straightforward declarative statements demanding passive and immediate acceptance. The central principle of Islam, however, is not given in the same fashion. The truth that is at the heart of Islam is not given as a pill to be passively swallowed or presented on a platter to be quietly accepted, but rather Islam demands from the one who wants to believe that he/she do something before the truth can be accessible. The demand made on a Muslim is that it is not enough to just accept *lā ilāha illā'llāh*, but that he/she has to do something to make the Truth of the phrase happen or come to be. It is not enough for me

to want to play a game; I have to work at learning the game in order to enjoy it. If the goal of 'Abd is to get closer to and have a relationship with Allah, the creator and sustainer of all the universes, then that finite creature has to work at the relationship by removing all the obstacles and barriers between him/her and Allah. The obstacles that exist in 'Abd's heart and mind are not the only ones to be removed. Since 'Abd is in the world, those in the world need also to be removed. The *lā* of *lā ilāha illā'llāh* hence connotes the demand that Islam makes on 'Abd to do something, to be active and not passive in accepting the Truth. The demand for doing something in order to come to the Truth is the critical potential of *lā ilāha illā'llāh*. It is the demand for removal, rejection, and destruction of all that makes the acceptance of oneness of Allah in all its stark singularity difficult to accept. For, after all, Allah the infinite being, cannot share space with any other being nor occupy already cluttered space. The *lā* of *lā ilāha illā'llāh* is the stiletto point, the sharp teeth of spurs with which 'Abd cuts and tears through whatever there may be between him/her and Allah.

Since 'Abd is an historical being and the search for the 'authentic self' an historical project, *lā ilāha illā'llāh* as a critical tool is not used once and then put aside, but rather it is the sword that remains constantly unsheathed in 'Abd's hands. *Lā ilāha illā'llāh* is the constant and continuous critique of whatever there is or will ever be in 'Abd's path as he/she struggles towards the 'authentic self'. In other words, *lā ilāha illā'llāh*, operates historically. Let us now examine how *lā ilāha illā'llāh* functions as a critical tool and how it operates historically.

Prepetual Use of the Critical Tool

A society, no matter how firmly established on the Qur'ānic principles, nevertheless remains a society of finite human beings who falter and fall and go stray giving rise to social situations and institutions that throw up obstacles in the path of 'Abd. A society, due to contingencies and accidents of history, cannot remain on course for long. Similarly, human beings due to infirmity of their finite nature cannot for long keep their hearts and minds free from overweening attachment to things other than Allah. In such situations, 'Abd has to use *lā ilāha illā'llāh* as the sword not only to cut down the weeds that have grown up in social space but also remove the impurities that have hardened around his/her heart and mind. Of course, if this activity is not engaged in at regular intervals soon weeds and impurities will overrun both the social and individual space. With no discerning heart and mind left, only the blast of Allah's wrath will then clear both the spaces.

The point, however, is not to keep society frozen in time in its pristine form by preventing it from changing. The desire to do so would amount to wanting to pluck society right out of history and keep it suspended in an unreal space, a space above and beyond the world of human beings of flesh and blood. If a society founded on the principles of the Qur'ān was prevented from changing, it would be not only not natural but one wonders if Islamic at all.

For one thing, it would definitely vitiate the universality of the Qur'ān, rendering it true for one time only. For other, it would curb human expansiveness that human beings "made in the best of mould" need time to realize. Although Allah, in His infinite wisdom, made us out of "the best of mould" yet He nevertheless put us in history. We are creatures shaped and designed by Allah. And by changing our circumstances and situations He tests us in history. According to the Qur'ān, time is not a malignant growth on the otherwise pure spiritual body of human being; nor, according to the Qur'ān, is human being a fallen creature stigmatized for eternity but rather exiled from heaven and situated in history in order to regain his/her rightful place in heaven. We are historical by design and not by accident. Thus *lā ilāha illā'llāh* operates historically by drawing attention to and removing such changes as create obstacles in the path of 'Abd. And so in the light of *lā ilāha illā'llāh* an Islamic society has to go on recreating and re-inventing itself in history. In other words, the task of deconstruction and construction initiated by *lā ilāha illā'llāh* is a continuous and an unending process.

Obstacles in the Path of "Authentic Self"

Now the question could be asked what sorts of things constitute a barrier or an obstacle in the path of 'Abd? Although a concrete answer to this question cannot be given, because it would depend on the specifics of a situation, yet a formal answer is indeed possible and in fact demanded to conclude the discussion.

Very early on, distinction was made between 'me' and 'mine'. It was argued that 'Abd is defined by his/her relationship to Allah and as a result 'Abd's self has no identity as such outside and independent of his/her relationship to Allah. 'Abd's relation to Allah, in other words, is constitutive of his/her 'authentic self'. If my 'authentic self' is 'me' then 'me' is nothing but my relationship to Allah and therefore the things that I possess or own are external to 'me'; that is to say, are not constitutive of me. What follows from this is that the failure to recognize and maintain this distinction would be detrimental to 'Abd's search for his/her 'authentic self'. The failure to acknowledge and maintain the distinction has serious consequence for my social existence and for society as a whole.

To fail to recognize the distinction between the two is to have 'me' defined by 'mine'. In a society in which 'me' and 'mine' are allowed to conflate, who and what I am will be determined by what I legitimately own, possess and have by way of talents, goods and wealth or lack thereof. In other words, not only my being will be a function of what I possess and own. To the question who are you? the only available answer in such a society would be, I am that who is rich or poor, owns or does not own this or that, talented or not talented, intelligent or not intelligent. In short, my being is reduced to what I have. And when what I have is arranged according to a status scale, what I have determines my social standing. My relationship to Allah in a

society where relation to goods and objects define 'me' will be yet another relationship alongside my relationship to objects. When, however, I bring my relationship to Allah down to the same level as my relationship to objects of this world I have seriously deviated from *lā ilāha illā'llāh*. My allegiance and surrender to Allah has lost its priority. Furthermore, when the distinction between 'me' and 'mine' is lost, the distinction between in and of history, which is crucial for the critical stance founded on the Qur'ān, also disappears. One is then hopelessly embroiled in society.

One may protest that no one can deny that after all my talent is indeed constitutive of who I am and hence constitutive of 'me' and my 'authentic self'. To make the claim that what talent I have is constitutive of me is tantamount to making a proprietary claim over it. It is to say, in other words, that I own the talent. But how can I have anything if Allah did not first give it to me? To make proprietary claim, therefore, is to deny the agency of Allah as the creator and the giver of everything in the world and also that which we as human beings possess. Nothing feeds the ego as the claim that I own the talent and thus I have the right to the privileges and honours that society bestows upon me due to my talent. And nothing is a bigger obstacle in the search for the 'authentic self' than one's ego; bigger the ego bigger the obstacle. Ego breeds arrogance and hence defies *lā ilāha illā'llāh*. And is not the declaration that Allah does not love those who are arrogant, a constant refrain in the Qur'ān precisely because arrogance through ego worship is the easiest trap for an 'Abd to fall into.

Society, Justice and "Authentic Self"

The Qur'ānic notion of an ethically just society cannot be grasped in the context of this world here and now. To analyze and debate the notion of justice in the context of just the social world would be a case of being of society. In such a case, as said earlier, we try to arrive at what is right and ethically just social arrangement by considering things only within society, totally rejecting life after death from our deliberation. But from the Qur'ānic point of view that life is a continuation of this life and neither one can be made sense of in isolation from the other. For after all life of each individual is a narrative of which the final denouement is reached after the curtain comes down on the first act, viz. life here. Hence justice, like every thing else in Islam, has to be understood in the context of total life that does not end with death.

A society that fails to recognize the distinction between 'me' and 'mine' cannot be truly a just society. For what I possess, including any talent that I may have, is largely the consequence of historical contingency. If in a society the accident of being born in a socially favourable position grants me a greater share of social goods and someone else by the same principle less, then such a society cannot be ethically just.

Taking Life as a Test

Although according to the Qur'an no stigma attaches the person who, by virtue of accident of birth, is born in a favourable position, yet if a person uses the wealth and privileges that accrue to him/her as a result of accident of birth for self-aggrandizement, then such a person is deserving of punishment. Allah tests some by giving more and others by giving less. To those who are given more, the test is how and to what end they use what is given to them; and for those who are given less, the test is how they struggle and in spite of failure persevere in patience and keep faith in Allah. Furthermore, those who are given more are accountable to Allah for more than those who are given less. I will presumably have an easier time in life hereafter if I am given less both in terms of talent and goods than someone who is given more. I will have less to account for.

Justice results when human beings realize that this life is just a test and try their best to do well in the test. I do justice to myself when I do not make proprietary claims on what I have but rather see myself as a trustee of Allah to whom I have to give account for every little thing that He has given me. If I regard what talent or worldly possession I may have, not as my personal fiefdom to dispose of it as I think fit but rather as obligations I owe Allah, then I will have no reason for being proud of what I own or possess. For what I own brings with it onerous duties and obligations. Since what is given to me is not my private property, I cannot use it primarily and purely for the satisfaction of my needs. Obsession with one's needs to the exclusion of the needs of others is greed and greed is a form of ego-worship negated by *lā ilāha illā'llāh*. I fulfil my obligations to Allah by serving others.

"Authentic Self" and Social Justice

'Abd realizes justice in his/her life by making the distinction between 'me' and 'mine' and subordinating all relationships to just one, namely, relationship to Allah. But the relationship to Allah is a process that requires constant effort and vigilance in trying to maintain the distinction. The greatest threat to the distinction between 'me' and 'mine' comes from society in which 'Abd is involved. And the failure of the society to maintain the distinction makes it unjust. 'Abd is, hence, all the time critically involved in society for the sake of realizing his/her 'authentic self'. This characterizes his/her social existence as being in history but not of history. In other words, while seeking to realize justice in his/her life, 'Abd succeeds in realizing social justice. In Islam the roads to social justice and to personal justice are not two separate roads but a single highway. You cannot achieve one without also realizing the other.

